

# Autism-Friendly and Sensory-Friendly: Expanding Community Access



## Memorandum Report 2020-7

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder resulting from differences in the brain that can impair individuals' communication and social skills and can cause sensory issues.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 59 children in the United States has ASD and other research estimates that approximately 70-90 percent of individuals with ASD have sensory processing issues. Individuals with autism are often sensitive to types or levels of light, noise, crowds, space, movements or patterns of others, and other factors related to sensory input. Research has shown that families of children with special needs, particularly ASD, are less likely to frequent public places and those families have higher levels of stress and strain compared to families with typically developing children.

Many national and local organizations work with businesses that want to adopt modifications responsive to the sensory needs of individuals – to be designated “autism-friendly” or “sensory-friendly.”<sup>2</sup> This Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) report responds to the Council’s interest in information about these types of designations and options to expand the designations of businesses in Montgomery County. Specifically, this memorandum report:

- Section I describes autism spectrum disorder (ASD), sensory processing, and how sensory issues in individuals with ASD and other diagnoses can impact individuals’ lives and social interactions;
- Section II describes the concept autism/sensory-friendly and identifies national and locally-based programs that designate businesses, venues, programs, and/or localities as autism/sensory-friendly;
- Section III summarizes how the Montgomery County Government has incorporated modifications into its programs, services, and venues to accommodate individuals with ASD or other sensory processing issues;
- Section IV includes options for next steps.

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, a sensory disability is a disability of the senses and can include disabilities such as low vision, blindness, hardness of hearing, and deafness. The discussion of sensory processing and “autism/sensory-friendly” in this report specifically refers to the type of sensory issues experienced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder – generally involving differences in how a person’s brain processes sensory input rather than a disability due to the loss of a sense. See Section I.A below.

<sup>2</sup> Among the criteria that organizations use to evaluate whether a business or environment is autism-friendly are factors primarily related to sensory processing – lights, sounds, smells, food choices, etc. Research shows that individuals with a variety of medical diagnoses experience sensory processing issues, including individuals with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), fragile X syndrome, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, among others. Accommodations that can make a business or venue “autism-friendly” often will also provide benefits to individuals beyond those with a diagnosis of ASD who also have sensory processing issues. Some resources refer to the types of accommodations described in this report more broadly as “sensory-friendly.” This report uses the terms interchangeably.

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## I. Autism Spectrum Disorder

“Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication.”<sup>3</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), autism is a developmental disability resulting from differences in the brain.<sup>4</sup> Autism manifests itself differently in each individual, but often includes a combination of:

- Difficulty with social interactions;
- Difficulty with communication;
- Difficulty with changes in routine;
- Unusual interest in objects;
- Atypical reactions related to the senses;
- Repeated actions or body movements; and/or
- Hyperactivity/impulsivity.

The CDC currently estimates that about 1 in 59 children in the United States has ASD.<sup>5</sup> The autism community and research literature often use the term “neurodiverse” to describe someone with ASD or other similar diagnoses. The term is the counterpoint to “neurotypical” – describing people who do not have ASD or other similar diagnoses.

ASD affects each individual differently and to varying degrees – it is a “spectrum disorder.” Some individuals with ASD do not communicate verbally while others can converse extensively using rich language. Some autistic individuals are not able to live independently – they may have self-injurious behavior or cannot independently perform activities of daily living such as eating or self-care. Autism can affect academic and professional achievements, everyday functioning, and integration into the community.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers have found that families of children with special needs, particularly ASD, are less likely to frequent public places and have higher levels of stress and strain compared to families with typically developing children.<sup>8</sup> One study found that sensory issues in particular impacted families’ daily routines and were an “important factor that limited participation in leisure activities.”<sup>9</sup>

Note also that while much of the scientific research on ASD focuses on children, autism spectrum disorder accompanies children into adulthood and its impacts are not limited to childhood. The discussions in this report are applicable to individuals with ASD regardless of age.

### Better understanding...

This report includes quotes from an article written by Christine M. Condo and published in *The Washington Post* on March 3, 2020.<sup>6</sup> Ms. Condo has what she terms “high-functioning autism” and her article sheds light on how autism impacts her everyday life – including her sensory issues and the effort required to try to “fit in” in a neurotypical world. These quotes are to help provide the reader with a better sense of how individuals with ASD experience the world and how different that experience can be from those who are neurotypical. Note that these quotes describe the perceptions of one person’s experience with ASD.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

<sup>6</sup> Condo, Christine M., “‘You don’t look autistic’: The reality of high-functioning autism,” *The Washington Post* (Mar. 3, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/03/03/you-dont-look-autistic-reality-high-functioning-autism/>

<sup>7</sup> Kojovic, Nada, et al., “Sensory Processing Issues and Their Association with Social Difficulties in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders,” *Journal of Clinical Medicine* (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Kong, Michele, et al., “A Community-Based Sensory Training Program Leads to Improved Experience at a Local Zoo for Children with Sensory Challenges,” *Frontiers in Pediatrics*, Vol 5, Article 193, at p. 4 (Sept. 15, 2017) [hereinafter Kong, “Community-Based Sensory Training Program”]. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5605637/pdf/fped-05-00193.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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## A. Sensory Processing

Sensory processing refers to the way the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into responses. In some individuals, sensory information goes into the brain but does not get organized into appropriate responses. These individuals perceive and/or respond to sensory information differently than most people and some responses may be considered inappropriate in the context in which a person finds themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Scientists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and others studying sensory issues describe eight sensory systems in the human body:

- Visual (seeing)
- Auditory (hearing)
- Olfactory (smell)
- Gustatory (taste)
- Tactile (touch)
- Vestibular (sense of head movement in space)
- Proprioception (sensations from muscles and joints of the body), and
- Interoception (sensations re: the physiological/physical condition of the body, e.g., hunger, thirst).<sup>11</sup>

Researchers estimate that up to 16 percent of children overall have issues with sensory processing. For individuals with ASD, estimates indicate that approximately 70-90 percent have sensory processing issues.<sup>12</sup> The past decade has seen much research related to sensory processing and a large amount of research focuses on sensory processing in children with ASD.<sup>13</sup> Researchers typically describe three ways in which individuals with sensory issues react to sensory input:<sup>14</sup>

<b>Hyper-responsiveness</b>	<b>Over-reactions to sensory environment</b> E.g., covering ears at certain sounds, sensitivity to light or tags in clothing
<b>Hypo-responsiveness</b>	<b>Under-reactions to sensory environment</b> E.g., not responding to a loud sound, pain, or extreme heat or cold
<b>Sensory-seeking</b>	<b>Seeking out certain sensations</b> E.g., repetitive touching of objects, prolonged visual inspection of objects

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/understanding-sensory-processing-disorder>. The basis for this description of sensory processing comes from The STAR Institute. The STAR Institute focuses on sensory processing disorder (SPD) – which refers to the neurological condition where sensory input results in atypical responses. At present, the medical and research communities are uncertain as to whether SPD should be an independent medical diagnosis or is a symptom of other conditions, like ASD. Such decisions can affect research funding, treatment and insurance payments.

<https://childmind.org/article/the-debate-over-sensory-processing/> This report uses the term “sensory issues” or “sensory processing issues” to refer generally to issues of individuals who have atypical responses to sensory input. The Office of Legislative Oversight does not take a position on whether SPD should be a medically recognized diagnosis on its own.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/your-8-senses#f8>

<sup>12</sup> McCormick, Carol, et al., “Sensory symptoms in children with autism spectrum disorder, other developmental disorders and typical development: A longitudinal study,” *Autism*, at p. 1 (Sept. 2015). Kong, “Community-Based Sensory Training Program” at p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> <https://chadd.org/adhd-weekly/new-research-in-sensory-processing-dysfunction/>;  
<https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/sensory-processing-disorder-children/40427/>

<sup>14</sup> McCormick, Carol, et al., “Sensory symptoms in children with autism spectrum disorder, other developmental disorders and typical development: A longitudinal study,” *Autism*, at p. 1 (Sept. 2015).

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Research shows that increased sensory issues in a child are related to pronounced social difficulties.<sup>15</sup> Often, the behavioral responses of individuals with sensory processing issues are outside what is considered “typical” or appropriate – particularly for public settings.<sup>16</sup> This can lead parents and/or caregivers of children with sensory processing issues to reduce outings, which can contribute to social isolation for the child, for the parents, and for neurotypical siblings.<sup>17</sup> Examples of responses to sensory input in individuals with ASD that may lead to social difficulties or isolation include:

- Fidgeting;
- Flapping of limbs, rocking back and forth, spinning;
- Making noise for “noise sake;”
- Avoiding eye contact;
- Repetitive behaviors;
- Inability to work in surroundings with distracting noise, such as radio or TV;
- Reacting negatively to touch;
- Sensory-seeking responses such as invading others’ personal space.

“Imagine having the acuity of your sense turned up to 11. Imagine being keenly aware of every single element of your environment, all the time, especially those you normally, reflexively ignore. Imagine that every time you walk out your front door, it is like being forced to walk too close to a wall of spikes that constantly threatens to impale you.”

Christine M. Condo

Accommodations for people with many types of disabilities are commonplace and seen throughout the community in businesses, schools, offices, theaters, etc. – e.g., ramps, automatic doors, and braille on signs. The disabilities that impact individuals with ASD and other sensory processing issues, however, often can’t be seen and providing accommodations in the community is not widespread. Many recommended supportive changes or modifications that make public and/or community spaces and events more inviting for people with ASD focus on sensory processing.

### B. Place-Based or Event-Based Modifications to Address Sensory Processing Issues

Many ASD-focused organizations highlight the importance and benefits of community inclusion for individuals with ASD.<sup>18</sup> Making modifications to places or events to alleviate some types of sensory distress can expand opportunities for individuals with ASD to participate in the community.

National and local organizations across the country provide businesses, organizations, local attractions, and local communities with recommendation on how to make spaces and programming more inclusive and inviting for individuals with ASD and/or other sensory processing issues.<sup>19</sup> The next table identifies various issues that can

<sup>15</sup> Kojovic, Nada, et al., “Sensory Processing Issues and Their Association with Social Difficulties in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders,” *Journal of Clinical Medicine* (Sept. 20, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Two senior students at the Ringling College of Art and Design created a film representation of the response to sensory input from a non-verbal child with autism. The short film has received praise from a variety of sources, including parents and educators who work with children with autism. The film is available here: <https://vimeo.com/103697707>.

<sup>17</sup> Kong, “Community-Based Sensory Training Program,” at p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Autism Society of America: <https://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/community-inclusion/>; Autism Speaks: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/information-topic#community>

<sup>19</sup> <https://childmind.org/article/tips-for-going-places-with-sensory-challenged-kids/>; <https://www.understood.org/en/family/events-outings/family-travel/9-tips-for-taking-kids-with-sensory-processing-issues-to-theme-parks>; *Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social and Cognitive Disabilities: A Guide for Performing Arts Settings*, The Kennedy Center, at p. 7 (2013) [hereinafter “The Kennedy Center, *A Guide for Performing Arts Settings*”].

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make interaction in the community difficult for individuals with ASD and examples of modifications that can help lessen the difficulties.

Note that these modifications are examples of what can help *some* individuals with sensory issues. Every individual, however, reacts differently to different stimuli and a sensory accommodation that helps one person may not help or may hinder another person. That said, many ASD resources recommend similar modifications.

"[I]magine that ... you concentrate on maintaining an elaborate performance to related to those around you while suppressing your natural mode of speaking and acting.... This performance, and the cognitive investment it entails, happens every time I leave the house. Otherwise, I'm at risk of being misunderstood and ostracized, something I and others like me have suffered many times throughout our lives."

Christine M. Condo

### Modifications to Help Address Individuals' Sensory Issues

Sensitivity/Issue	Modifications That Can Help
Sound	Lower volume of or eliminate ambient music, provide or allow use of noise-cancelling headphones, provide a designated quiet room or area, keep sounds at a consistent level
Lighting/Visual	Minimize strobe or flashing lights, ensure lighting is not too glaring or too dark, use a muted color palette
Waiting	Provide expedited or supported check-out or alternatives to standing in line
Movement	Allow guests to talk, walk around, and/or leave/re-enter a venue
Tactile	Provide or allow sensory object/toys, fidgets, weighted blankets/lap pads, comfort items
Scents	Use fragrance-free cleaners, use odor neutralizers and air purifiers
Food-related issues	Provide gluten-free and casein-free options
Unfamiliarity with venue, need for routines, difficulty with transition/change	Provide social narratives/pre-visit materials, <sup>20</sup> allow visits to venue before an event, provide online 360-degree tours

Sources: *Building Autism Friendly Communities – Step by Step: A Guide for Businesses to become Autism Friendly*, Autism Society of America (2016), *Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social and Cognitive Disabilities: A Guide for Performing Arts Settings*, The Kennedy Center (2013).

<sup>20</sup> A social narrative or social story "is a short, written story that shows information about a social situation. The story can describe specific information about an activity, situation and event, or convey information about behavioral expectations often associated with the social situation." *Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social and Cognitive Disabilities: A Guide for Performing Arts Settings*, The Kennedy Center, at p. 7 (2013). Social narratives typically have pictures of the locations at a venue (e.g., entrance, ticket office, bathrooms, exhibits, stairways or elevators, etc.) to allow someone reading the narrative to see familiar things when they are at the venue. Social narratives may also describe what to expect during a program at a venue (e.g., clapping, dimmed lights, music, etc.). Information and examples:

[https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/SocialNarratives\\_Steps\\_0.pdf](https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/SocialNarratives_Steps_0.pdf);

[https://www.miamidadearts.org/sites/default/files/files/inline/mcm\\_pre-visit\\_guide.pdf](https://www.miamidadearts.org/sites/default/files/files/inline/mcm_pre-visit_guide.pdf);

[https://kcwebsiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/default-source/pdfs/accessibility/services/sensory-friendly\\_pre-visit\\_basic.pdf](https://kcwebsiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/default-source/pdfs/accessibility/services/sensory-friendly_pre-visit_basic.pdf);

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## II. “Autism-Friendly” and “Sensory-Friendly” Designations

The autism community includes numerous organizations that have been providing information about and resources related to ASD for decades. Examples include:

- Autism Society of America (est. 1965)
- Autism Research Institute (est. 1967)
- Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at University of Southern Florida (est. 1993)
- International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES) (est. 2001)
- Autism Speaks (est. 2005)

Among other things, these organizations (and many others) have advocated for businesses, venues, and/or programs to adopt sensory modifications to increase opportunities for individuals with ASD or other sensory issues to participate in their offerings. Many businesses nationwide have created tailored programming to facilitate participation of individuals with ASD at specific times. Examples include:

- **AMC Theaters’ Sensory Friendly Film Program**<sup>21</sup>  
Lights turned up, sound turned down, ability to get up and move around
- **Chuck E. Cheese’s Sensory Sensitive Sundays**<sup>22</sup>  
Specific hours, dimmed lighting, game music turned down or off, quieter and limited appearance of Chuck E.
- **The Kennedy Center’s sensory-friendly performances**<sup>23</sup>  
Lower sound, lights remain on at low level, reduction in strobe lighting, ability to get up, move around, and talk, designated quiet areas
- **Strathmore’s sensory-friendly performances**<sup>24</sup>  
Lower sound, lights remain on at low level, reduction in strobe lighting, ability to get up, move around, and talk, designated quiet areas

These programs incorporate modifications to make it more likely that individuals with ASD or other sensory issues can participate comfortably. Representatives in Montgomery County’s disability community report that these types of programs are well-liked in the ASD community but note that the availability of programs is limited and that programming can be scheduled at that are unpopular with the general public, which often are times that are unpopular for individuals with ASD and/or their families.

Beyond facilitating access for individuals with ASD at specific times for specific programs or events, many ASD organizations also recommend permanent sensory accommodations that will facilitate access to a business, venue, or program at any time.<sup>25</sup> Modifications in the table on page five, such as lighting, signage, and/or

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.amctheatres.com/programs/sensory-friendly-films>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.chuckecheese.com/events/sensory-sensitive-sundays>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.kennedy-center.org/visit/accessibility/sensory/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.strathmore.org/events-and-tickets/strathmore-kids/sensory-friendly-performances-at-strathmore>

<sup>25</sup> Some organizations expand the conversation about autism-friendly businesses – which typically refers to businesses making modifications to accommodate neurodiverse customers – to include how businesses can modify hiring processes to recruit neurodiverse individuals. <https://www.ccsnct.org/services/adult/employer-consultation/> Many neurodiverse people have high-level abilities in areas such as math, memory, and pattern recognition that make them ideal job candidates in certain industries. Neurodiverse individuals, however, face higher levels of unemployment or underemployment – even among individuals who can work in a typical workplace. In recent years, several prominent companies have developed programs to recruit neurodiverse employees, including SAP, Microsoft, EY, and Ford. See,

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availability of noise-cancelling headphones, plus staff training, can make a venue more sensory-friendly on an ongoing basis.<sup>26</sup> Recommended modifications to a venue may differ significantly based on the nature of a business – e.g., modifications to a library vs. a grocery store vs. a sports arena.

Numerous nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, and some university-affiliated centers work with businesses or venues to identify and implement sensory-friendly modifications. Some provide services for a fee and some, like the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at University of Southern Florida, work with businesses or organizations at no cost. These organizations often will provide a business a “certification” indicating that the business is sensory-friendly or autism-friendly.<sup>27</sup>

“As autism awareness increases, so does my success in asking for accommodations. I have managed to get the music turned down in a restaurant and be moved to a corner table away from the dining bustle.... One day I hope I can easily get what I need when I reveal my autism, rather than being met with skepticism. If someone tells you they are autistic, it means they are under sensory assault while working unbelievably hard to appear normal to you.”

Christine M. Condo

ASD organizations and many businesses assert that providing accommodations is “good for business.” One organization that certifies businesses – the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards – provides the following examples of impacts businesses experienced following autism certification:

- 400 families on opening day of Sesame Place;
- Guest satisfaction scores up 45% at Aquatica (first three months);
- \$200K grant for autism improvements at Elmwood Park Zoo; and
- 6 billion web hits on autism page at Sesame Place (first year).<sup>28</sup>

Experts in the field emphasize that training staff about ASD and sensory issues and about how to interact with or assist individuals is key to creating a sensory-friendly environment. Certification/designation programs generally include a staff training/education component, examination of (and if needed, guidance on modifications to) the physical environment, and guidance on signage and other venue-specific factors. The staff training components often are on-line training rather than in-person training.

Note that each organization that provides these types of services to businesses defines for itself the meaning of “certified” or “designated.” There is no single standard used to designate a business or venue as “autism- or sensory-friendly.” Each certifying organization establishes its own criteria, standards, and processes.

The next table identifies several organizations/programs that provide certifications and lists examples of certification requirements.

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Austin, Robert, et al., “Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage,” Harvard Business Review, (May-June 2017)

<https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/community-inclusion/autismfriendly/businessprogram/#business>;  
<http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/community/business.html>

<sup>27</sup> A current internet search reveals that many organizations or companies will certify businesses, venues, or events as “autism-friendly” or “sensory-friendly.” Discussions with Executive Branch staff who provide training about ASD highlighted that businesses are being created around the country to provide certifications because there is increasing demand. Executive Branch staff report that some business owners lack credentials and experience in working with or knowledge about individuals with ASD and create businesses simply to profit from providing certifications.

<sup>28</sup> [https://ibcces.org/autism\\_certified\\_city/](https://ibcces.org/autism_certified_city/)

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## Examples of Programs that Provide Autism or Sensory Certifications

Certifications or Designation	Examples	Certification Components
<b>International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES)</b> Jacksonville, FL		
Certified Neurodiversity Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mesa, AZ (certified city)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff training</li> </ul>
Certified Autism Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sesame Place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuing education</li> </ul>
Certified Autism Destination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SeaWorld Orlando</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-site review by IBCCES</li> </ul>
Certified Autism Travel Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Museum of the American Revolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance on useful venue modifications</li> </ul>
Autism Certified City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dorney Park</li> </ul>	
<b>KultureCity</b> Birmingham, AL		
Sensory Inclusive Certified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metlife Stadium (NJ)</li> <li>• Cameron Indoor Stadium (Duke Univ.)</li> <li>• Yogibo furniture retail stores</li> <li>• Carnival Cruise Line</li> <li>• Birmingham (AL) Zoo</li> <li>• Birmingham-Shuttlesworth Airport Sensory Room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff training</li> <li>• Guidance on useful venue modifications</li> <li>• Site survey to identify needs/signage</li> <li>• Creation of social story</li> </ul>
<b>Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at University of Southern Florida</b> Tampa, FL		
Autism Friendly Business Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Florida Aquarium</li> <li>• Glazer Children’s Museum</li> <li>• Great Explorations Children’s Museum</li> <li>• Chuck E. Cheese’s Sensory Sensitive Sundays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff training</li> <li>• Examination of business locations, practices/procedures, and environment</li> <li>• Guidance on useful venue modifications</li> <li>• Support for business owners and managers</li> </ul>
<b>Families for Effective Autism Treatment (FEAT)</b> Louisville, KY		
Autism Friendly Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Louisville, KY Metro Council</li> <li>• Kentucky Science Center</li> <li>• Kentucky Railway Museum</li> <li>• Bob Swope Ford</li> <li>• Special Strands Hair Salon</li> <li>• U of Louisville Health Peace Hospital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff training</li> <li>• Guidance on useful venue modifications</li> <li>• Review of hiring strategies and promotion of a supportive work environment to individuals with ASD</li> </ul>
<b>Champion Autism Network (CAN)</b> Surfside Beach, SC		
CAN Certified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Famous Toastery, Myrtle Beach, SC</li> <li>• Benjamin’s Bakery, Surfside Beach, SC</li> <li>• NY Pizza Kitchen, Myrtle Beach, SC</li> <li>• Coastal Car Wash, Pawleys Island, SC</li> <li>• Surf City Surf Shop, Myrtle Beach, SC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-site review of property and business procedures</li> <li>• Guidance on useful accommodations, discounts, or services</li> <li>• Staff education materials</li> </ul>
<b>Autism Society of America</b> Bethesda, MD		
Autism Friendly Business Challenge		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meets standards for service area (e.g., retail)</li> <li>• Business agrees to respond to written concerns</li> <li>• Guidance on useful venue modifications</li> <li>• Staff training</li> <li>• Self-reporting</li> </ul>

Sources: <https://ibcces.org/>, <https://www.kulturecity.org/>, <http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/>, <https://featoflouisville.org/>, <https://championautismnetwork.com/>, <https://www.autism-society.org/>

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Many of the examples in the table above are large venues, nationwide programs, or significant tourist attractions. Sensory modifications, however, can be made in most types of businesses – including local and small businesses – to make the environment more inclusive for individuals with ASD and others. Some local organizations, such as FEAT in Louisville, Kentucky and CAN in Surfside Beach, South Carolina, commonly work with local businesses to develop modifications and accommodations for individuals with ASD or other sensory issues. The types of modifications that local businesses can make are the same kinds described above – e.g., adjustments to lighting, sound, scents, access to aids such as noise-canceling headphones or fidgets, and improved signage.

**Autism Certified City – Mesa, AZ.** In late 2019, the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES) certified Mesa, Arizona as the first “autism certified city” in the United States based on the City’s efforts to recruit a large number of businesses, service providers, and attractions to pursue certification.<sup>29</sup> Participants in the program include hotels, museums, festivals, the City of Mesa Parks, Recreation & Community Facilities, restaurants, and other community resources including chambers of commerce, the Mesa Convention Center, and area nonprofit organizations. For designated business or organizations, IBCCES provides access to online staff training materials and onsite review of facilities to evaluate and recommend modifications. Mesa’s initiative was spearheaded by Visit Mesa – the city’s tourism organization. Local ASD treatment providers recommended to Visit Mesa teaming with IBCCES for certifications.

**Carnival Cruise Line.** Many ships on Carnival Cruise Line have been “sensory certified” by KultureCity and the cruise line reports that all of its ships will have that designation by March 2020.<sup>30</sup> As part of its designation, Carnival Cruise Lines is training its guest-facing staff to understand and help individuals with sensory/cognitive needs. The ships also provide access to “Sensory Bags” that include noise-canceling headphones, fidgets, a visual feeling thermometer, and a KultureCity VIP lanyard to help staff identify guests with sensory issues. Guests with sensory issues can request private safety briefings. And youth staff have access to items such as weighted vests, conversation cards, and sensory games.

**Local Government Autism and Sensory Inclusion.** Some state and local governments are also developing and promoting autism/sensory-friendly community options such as recreation facilities, sensory rooms, and online resource guides for local activities. The next table includes just a few examples.

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<sup>29</sup> [https://ibcces.org/autism\\_certified\\_city/](https://ibcces.org/autism_certified_city/); <https://www.visitmesa.com/autism-travel/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.carnival.com/about-carnival/special-needs/children-special-needs.aspx>

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Jurisdiction	Autism/Sensory-Friendly Offerings
Fairfax County, Virginia	Sensory Room in Providence Community Center, Clemyjontri Park, webpage: social and leisure activities for people with disabilities <sup>31</sup>
Lansing, Michigan	Webpage of sensory-friendly regional attractions provided by the Greater Lansing Convention and Visitors Bureau <sup>32</sup>
Louisville, KY	Sensory Strategy Space in Louisville Public Library Discovery Center <sup>33</sup>
Miami-Dade County, Florida	Superheroes Garden Autism Playground at Tamiami Park <sup>34</sup>
Surfside Beach, South Carolina	Webpage of autism-friendly information for Town of Surfside Beach, SC <sup>35</sup>

**Resources for sensory-friendly venues.** Both representatives from the disability community and County staff emphasized that there are few comprehensive resources for finding information about autism-friendly or sensory-friendly programs and/or businesses. Organizations that provide autism/sensory-friendly designations often compile designated businesses in an online guide or through a mobile application. The appendix to this report lists some available resources of information regarding ASD and autism/sensory-friendly community resources.

## III. Montgomery County Government

Providing accommodations and accessible services for individuals with ASD and other sensory processing issues is not new to Montgomery County Government. The County has many programs focused on inclusion, including sensory-friendly programming – and several cohorts of County employees are specifically trained to work with individuals with ASD and other sensory processing issues.

A 2018 County Government work group on meeting the needs of residents with developmental disabilities/differences recommended increasing sensory-friendly programming even more. The County Council, which established the work group via a Council Resolution, asked the work group to “review and report on current gaps in services” for individuals with development disabilities.<sup>36</sup> The Resolution stated that “Montgomery County is committed to creating an inclusive community for people with disabilities so that they are treated equitably and fairly and can participate fully in the life of the county.”<sup>37</sup>

In the area of recreation, the work group highlighted providing “sensory-friendly” or “autism-friendly” programs.<sup>38</sup> The 2018 work group also recommended that new County facilities be “planned intentionally for inclusion beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/neighborhood-community-services/therapeutic-recreation/sensory-room>; <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/clemyjontri>; <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/familyservices/disabilities/social-and-leisure-activities>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.lansing.org/things-to-do/sensoryfriendly/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.louisvillelibrary.org/services/sensory-space>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.miamidade.gov/releases/2019-04-22-parks-tamiami-park-autism-playground-dedication.asp>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.surfsidebeach.org/autism-friendly>; <http://www.surfsidebeach.org/Data/Sites/1/media/town-council/resolutions/16-162.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Council Resolution 18-989 (Dec. 12, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Report of the Work Group on Meeting the Needs of Residents with Developmental Differences, at p. 54 (Nov. 26, 2018). [https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/col/2018/20181127/20181127\\_7HH.pdf](https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/col/2018/20181127/20181127_7HH.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. at p. 55.

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This section describes various County Government programs and services that are designed to be sensory-friendly. It also describes training of County Government staff to work with individuals with ASD and other sensory processing issues provided in the:

- Department of Recreation;
- Montgomery County Public Libraries;
- Montgomery County Police Department; and
- Montgomery Parks.

The section ends with feedback from the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities and the Commission's DD Advisory Board. Interviews with Executive Branch and Montgomery Parks staff revealed that staff who work on inclusion also work together across departments to support their similar missions.

### A. Department of Recreation

The County Government's Department of Recreation (Recreation) provides accessible and inclusive activities and options through its Therapeutic Recreation program.<sup>40</sup> Options specifically for individuals with disabilities range from summer camps for youth up to age 21 to youth and adult classes in arts, fitness, and aquatics to adult social clubs. Many of the options are open to all persons with disabilities and some are geared toward individuals with ASD. In all of the Therapeutic Recreation-run camps and classes, Recreation staff modify traditional programming and/or components to address, among other things, individuals with sensory issues. Examples of modifications for sensory issues can include:

- Modified lighting;
- Sound machines;
- Scent machines;
- Tactile manipulatives; and
- Mats or crash pads.

Therapeutic Recreation has also developed stand-alone events geared toward individuals with sensory issues. One example is a Santa's Holiday Workshop in a sensory-friendly environment.

In addition, staff from Therapeutic Recreation receive and respond to requests for accommodations in Recreation's mainstream camps, classes, and programs. Examples of common accommodations include adjusting lighting when possible, providing alternative seating such as ball or bean bag chairs, and allowing earbuds or headphones. Therapeutic recreation may also provide companions as needed for program participants – to allow breaks, explain instructions in simpler steps or at slower pace, allow additional time to transition in/out of activities, and/or provide alternative activities.

The staff responsible for Recreation's Therapeutic Recreation program include one part-time Recreation Coordinator (0.7 FTE), four Recreation Specialists, and shared time of one Recreation Supervisor. These staff are responsible for developing programs, hiring and training staff and volunteers, marketing and outreach, and providing supplies for all of Therapeutic Recreation's camps, classes, events, and programs.

Therapeutic Recreation provides training for staff and volunteers working in Recreation programs, classes, summer camps, and activities about how to work with and interact with people with disabilities. At times, staff

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/rec/activitiesandprograms/therapeuticrec/>

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from the Montgomery Parks component of M-NCPPC and other local jurisdictions will participate in trainings. Class offerings vary and include:

- Sensitivity to Disability and Diversity;
- Caught You Being Good (Behavior Management);
- Disability Characteristics; and
- ADA Basics.

Therapeutic Recreation partners with the Montgomery County Police Department's Autism/Intellectual, Developmental Disability (IDD) and Alzheimer's/Dementia Outreach Unit for information and outreach fairs for parents and caregivers and to train Recreation staff working with individuals with ASD and IDD about how to respond when there may be need for a first responder.

Therapeutic Recreation also works with local organizations like Autism Ambassadors to publicize its ASD-friendly and sensory-friendly events and offerings. Autism Ambassadors is a local, private group that develops local autism-friendly recreation events and has a contact list of over 800 families. Recreation representatives report that the Department continuously works to evolve collaborations and partnerships with community groups to increase awareness of and offerings for individuals with disabilities and their families and friends.

### **B. Montgomery County Public Libraries**

Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL) trains library-based staff on how to interact and work with customers with ASD. And recently MCPL has developed and implemented sensory-friendly story times in library branches. MCPL's sensory-friendly story times began as a recommendation from MCPL's Accessibility Advisory Committee to develop sensory-friendly programming and from requests for such programming from library customers.

Research by MCPL staff found that story times are the most common type of sensory-friendly programming provided by libraries. MCPL staff developed the program by finding best practices and attending trainings by other libraries. The program initially was piloted at three MCPL branches – White Oak, Little Falls, and Quince Orchard. MCPL staff used feedback from the pilot to hone the programming for the larger library system.

In the past year, children's staff from each branch received training about interacting with individuals with ASD and sensory processing issues. This training is now incorporated into training that all children's staff receive when initially hired. MCPL has also conducted voluntary training for branch staff who work with adults about interacting with individuals with ASD and sensory processing issues.

Unlike MCPL's general story time programs that do not limit attendance, sensory-friendly story times are limited to 12 registrants. Each registrant can come with parents, caregivers, and/or siblings so the story times typically include more than 12 people. At story times, library staff have both general enrichment materials typical to story times (e.g., scarves, bean bags) plus sensory items such as noise-canceling headphones, weighted lap blankets, and fidgets.

Following the program pilot, MCPL asked each library branch to hold three sensory-friendly story times and provide feedback on attendance and community interest. Based on this trial, eight of MCPL's 21 branches had enough interest to continue sensory-friendly story times as regular programming. Five branches had no attendees at their scheduled story times and the remaining eight branches had mixed attendance and are discussing with MCPL's administration whether to continue the story times in the future.

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In addition, some library customers provide feedback on the physical library environments and MCPL administration incorporates the feedback as it designs new or remodels existing libraries. Specifically related to sensory issues, for example, some customers have found some library branches to be too visually “busy” – with too much pattern in the carpets or colors that are too bright. Staff charged with designing library spaces have incorporated this feedback into their work. MCPL also tries to include some sort of window treatment on all windows to reduce excessive glare, which can be an issues for individuals with sensory issues.

### C. Montgomery County Police Department

The Montgomery County Police Department’s (MCPD) Autism/IDD and Alzheimer’s/Dementia Outreach Unit trains police recruits, officers, and others in the County Government and community about interacting and working with individuals with Autism, IDD, and Alzheimer’s/dementia. MCPD also works with individuals with ASD and/or IDD on how to safely interact with police officers. The program began in 2004 in response to a growing number of calls for critically missing persons due to wandering and has grown to provide resources and support for all types of interactions with law enforcement.

MCPD developed its training program in conjunction with the organization Autism Speaks because very few jurisdictions provided training in 2004 on how to work with individuals with ASD, IDD, and/or Alzheimer’s/dementia. The curriculum is taught by MCPD officers who have first-hand experience in search and rescue and understanding of the dynamics of having positive/effective interactions with individuals with ASD, IDD, and/or Alzheimer’s/dementia. MCPD’s “layered” program includes:

Education	• Training for officers, caregivers, and others in the community
Outreach	• Community events (e.g., Autism Night Out); outreach through traditional and social media
Follow-up	• Education in the community and/or for caregivers after an incident
Empowerment	• Recognition of individuals, families, and businesses that have gone above and beyond to help the community or MCPD work with individuals with ASD, IDD, Alzheimer’s/dementia
Response	• Prompt response to calls and coordinated efforts with MCPD patrol and Managed Search and Rescue Team

MCPD also provides training for:

- Public and school transportation workers;
- National and local hospitals;
- Nursing homes/group homes/assisted living facilities;
- Chambers of Commerce;
- Caregivers; and
- Individuals.

MCPD’s Autism/IDD and Alzheimer’s/Dementia Outreach Unit has been spearheaded by Officer Laurie Reyes since it began and she has developed and refined teaching curricula for the Unit over the years. Both the Unit and Officer Reyes have received numerous awards, including the U.S. Attorney General’s Award for Distinguished Service in Policing and a Governor’s Citation for creation of the Autism/IDD and Alzheimer’s/Dementia Outreach Unit.

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### D. Montgomery Parks

Montgomery Parks, a Department of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) that oversees park land, facilities, amenities and leisure programs in Montgomery County – strives to ensure accessibility to individuals with disabilities. The Montgomery Parks Access Team focuses on accessibility and inclusion in three primary areas – physical access, program access, and communications access. Physical Access staff ensure that parks, facilities and amenities are in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) meeting accessibility standards. Program Access staff coordinate and provide support services promoting inclusion in programs requiring registration – including summer camps and year-round leisure programs. Communications Access Staff oversee accessibility of website and written materials for people with disabilities.

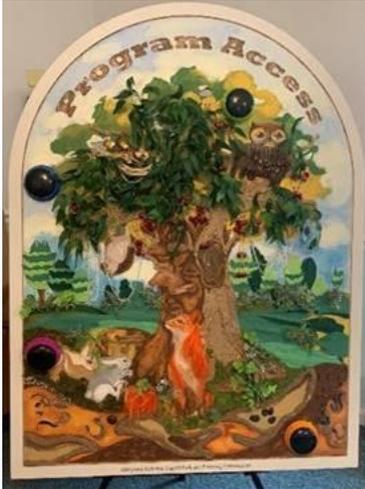
Two full-time Montgomery Parks employees focus on compliance with ADA standards ensuring physical accessibility in park planning and development projects – a Senior ADA Project Manager and an ADA Project Manager. The Program Access Office includes three full-time career employees – a Program Access Coordinator and two Program Access Specialists. Program Access staff coordinate and provide support services promoting inclusion in programs requiring registration – including summer camps and year-round leisure programs. They develop and implement inclusion policies, procedures and guidelines for Department staff and coordinate Montgomery Parks’ support services, community outreach, and program development.

Program Access staff also provide customized training for Montgomery Parks staff members on the ADA, customer service, effective total communication, disability awareness and characteristics – training over 1,500 staff members in the past five years. Program Access’ programming supports include providing additional staff as needed, assistive listening devices, sign language interpretation, materials in Braille and large print, adaptive equipment and sensory objects/fidgets, among other things. The largest group served by Program Access is individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Sixteen seasonal staff members assist with support and programming needs and, in the summer of 2020, each of the four Montgomery Parks Nature Centers will have additional dedicated inclusion support staff.

In addition to providing access for ongoing Parks programming, Program Access operates “Access on Wheels,” a trailer that houses accessible/adaptive equipment that can be taken to temporary special events throughout the County. In addition to equipment such as mobility mats, mobile ramps, hand rails, wheelchairs and walkers, assisted listening devices, etc., the trailer also includes equipment that can help individuals with sensory issues, including a tent with accessories for a “calming station or retreat” (e.g., cot, pillows, blanket, bean bag chair, bubble machine, fidgets, noise cancelling headphones).

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Program Access staff also participate in many community events and resource fairs throughout the County to promote inclusive programs and inclusion services available to Parks users. Included in their tabling display, is a sensory board created for use during programming – shown in the picture on the left. Additional outreach endeavors include planning and implementing inclusive events- “Light It Up Blue”: An Autism Awareness and Acceptance Event, an “All Anglers Fishing Derby”, and the “ADA 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sensory Friendly” movie night. Highlighting the interaction among County staff who work on inclusion, Program Access staff participates in the I/DD Autism Night Out– created by MCPD’s Autism/IDD and Alzheimer’s/Dementia Outreach Unit.

The Montgomery Parks Access Team members are continuously researching additional ways to expand inclusion in Montgomery Parks. Future projects include development of sensory-friendly spaces if they can acquire the necessary funding.

### **E. Feedback from the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities and the Commission’s DD Advisory Board**

Members of the Commission on People with Disabilities and the Commission’s’ DD Advisory Board provided feedback to OLO about sensory-friendly designations and community participation for individuals with ASD. The Advisory Board strongly supports encouraging businesses, programs, and venues to implement sensory-friendly modifications and staff training. Important points for consideration from Advisory Board members include:

- A major limitation/hinderance to outings with adult individuals with ASD with caregivers is a lack of gender-neutral bathrooms. Caregivers report a distinct difference in public perception when taking a child into an opposite-sex bathroom vs. taking an adult into an opposite-sex bathroom;
- High speed electric hand dryers, which are becoming more common in area bathrooms, are a significant source of sensory distress for many individuals with sensory issues;
- Business events that are autism/sensory-friendly often are scheduled them at times that are unpopular with the general public. Those times are also often unpopular for individuals with ASD and caregivers and can limit participation;
- Businesses could provide discounted admission prices for caregivers of adults with ASD. Recreation activities such as movies can be prohibitively expensive, especially for families that also have expenses related to caring for individuals with disabilities;
- Information about available activities, resources, and services for individuals with ASD is not consolidated in an easily accessible online resource.

Representatives from these groups and others that OLO interviewed also highlighted that advocacy for and success with expanding available autism/sensory-friendly resources often comes from the work of a “champion” in the disability community (often someone who has a relative with ASD) who is in a position to influence local business communities and/or local government.

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## IV. Next Steps

Individuals from many constituencies in Montgomery County support increasing the number of businesses in the County with autism/sensory-friendly designations – including Executive and Legislative Branch representatives and program staff, members of the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities and the Commission’s DD Advisory Group, and local autism/disability community. The effort, by definition, would require the agreement and active participation of the local business community. Program leadership could come from public or private sector stakeholders, or from a joint effort among groups. The bullets below identify several possible “next steps” to further the conversation:

- Identify a “champion” to lead the effort;
- Solicit feedback from other jurisdictions undertaking similar efforts;
- Meet with members of the business community to gauge interest in participation;
- Determine a workable process for local businesses to participate and receive designations – whether through an established organization or another mechanism;
- Determine costs and consider funding options to help businesses receive certification;
- Widely publicize business participation.

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## V. Acknowledgements

OLO appreciates all of the effort, assistance, and feedback provided for this report. The following individuals met with and/or provided information to OLO. If we inadvertently failed to identify someone, the oversight is unintentional. OLO staff members Stephanie Bryant, Kristen Latham, and Kelli Robinson also assisted with this report.

\* Designates County Government department director or Chief

### County Government

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Raymond Crowell, HHS\*  
David Dise, DGS\*  
Karen Gipson, HHS  
Chief Marcus Jones, MCPD\*  
Fariba Kassiri, CEX  
Elizabeth Lang, MCPL  
Betsy Luecking, HHS  
Kim Mayo, HHS  
Sharon Norcio, REC  
Officer Laurie Reyes, MCPD  
Robin Riley, REC\*  
Commission on People with Disabilities  
Commission's DD Advisory Group

### M-NCPPC – Montgomery Parks

Marybeth Dugan  
Miti Figueredo

### Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce

Gigi Godwin, President and CEO

### IBCCES

Meredith Tekin, President

### KultureCity

Uma Srivastava

### Autism Society of America

Scott Badesch, Former President/CEO

### The Center for Children with Special Needs

Michael Powers, Executive Director  
Seth Powers, Director of Development and Business Operations

### VisitMesa

Marc Garcia, President and CEO

### Autism Ambassadors

Whitney Ellenby

The mission of the Montgomery County (MD) Office of Legislative Oversight is to provide accurate information, analysis, and independent findings and recommendations that help the Montgomery County Council fulfill its legislative function.

[www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo)

## Appendix

### Resources for Autism/Sensory-Friendly Activities

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Be Like Buddy	<a href="https://www.belikebuddy.com/">https://www.belikebuddy.com/</a>
Upcounty Community Resources*	<a href="https://www.ucresources.org/">https://www.ucresources.org/</a>
KultureCity Sensory Inclusive App	<a href="https://www.kulturecity.org/sensory-inclusive-app/">https://www.kulturecity.org/sensory-inclusive-app/</a>
International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES)	<a href="https://apps.ibcces.org/cert/registry">https://apps.ibcces.org/cert/registry</a>

### Organizations that Do Business Designations/Certifications

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IBCCES	<a href="https://ibcces.org/">https://ibcces.org/</a>
KultureCity	<a href="https://www.kulturecity.org/">https://www.kulturecity.org/</a>
Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at University of Southern Florida	<a href="http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/">http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/</a>
Families for Effective Autism Treatment (FEAT)	<a href="https://featoflouisville.org/">https://featoflouisville.org/</a>
Champion Autism Network	<a href="https://championautismnetwork.com/">https://championautismnetwork.com/</a>
Autism Society of America	<a href="https://www.autism-society.org/">https://www.autism-society.org/</a>

### Tourism Resources

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Autism Travel (IBCCES)	<a href="https://autismtravel.com/">https://autismtravel.com/</a>
Autism on the Seas	<a href="https://autismontheseas.com/">https://autismontheseas.com/</a>

### General Autism Resources

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Autism Now	<a href="https://autismnow.org/">https://autismnow.org/</a>
Autism Society of America	<a href="http://source.autism-society.org/autismsource/">http://source.autism-society.org/autismsource/</a>
Autism Society of Montgomery County*	<a href="http://www.autismmontgomerycounty.org/home.html">http://www.autismmontgomerycounty.org/home.html</a>
Autism Speaks	<a href="https://www.autismspeaks.org/help-and-information">https://www.autismspeaks.org/help-and-information</a>
CDC links to other Autism Resources	<a href="https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/links.html">https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/links.html</a>
Council of Autism Service Providers	<a href="https://casproviders.org/casp-directory-results/">https://casproviders.org/casp-directory-results/</a>
Montgomery County Disability Network Directory – Autism Resources*	<a href="https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/DND/DNDAutism.pdf">https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/DND/DNDAutism.pdf</a>
Partnership for Extraordinary Minds*	<a href="https://xminds.org/">https://xminds.org/</a>
Pathfinders for Autism*	<a href="https://pathfindersforautism.org/">https://pathfindersforautism.org/</a>
US HHS Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee	<a href="https://www.iacc.hhs.gov/resources/">https://www.iacc.hhs.gov/resources/</a>

\* Montgomery County-based organization